

## Lucerne establishment ~ Get the basics right!

A recent EverGraze seminar in Hamilton attracted over 130 farmers to understand how to establish and manage lucerne.

Reg Hill, Australian Research Manager for PGGWrightsons Seeds highlighted that to grow lucerne successfully you had to get the basics right.

“Lucerne is a valuable crop”, said Mr Hill. “So choose your best paddock which has no hard pans, no waterlogging and a pH of at least 5.6 in the top soil and sub soil. Aluminium levels need to be low and general soil fertility needs to be good”, he added.

There are also some general principles when it comes to establishment of lucerne. Time of sowing is important. Generally lucerne grown south of the Divide is established in spring, but Reg warns you need to be confident of follow up rain to ensure establishment is successful.

“Autumn sowing is also an option, but you need to be on top of your weed control”, said Reg.

The seed needs to be sown at least 10 to 15mm deep into a stable moisture zone. At this depth the seed will not be affected by frosts and are more capable of being able to survive a dry spell.

Direct drilling is cheaper but be aware that root establishment, particularly in heavier soils, will be slower and you will need to watch for weeds and pests.

In the past the recommended sowing rate has been 10 to 15 kg/ha but Bill says it appears the thicker the sowing rate, the better the establishment.

“A sowing rate of 20kg/ha seems to result in a better stand’, said Reg. When I said this at a recent field day a farmer scoffed at me. I thought I was about to be berated for trying to sell more seed when the farmer said ‘You mean 30kg/ha - that’s what gets results!’”

Reg has found that thicker sowing rates produced a quicker plant canopy which reduces soil moisture evaporation resulting in better plant growth.

Inoculation of the seed is a vital step in the process.

“Make sure the inoculation is fresh and viable’, Reg said “Without inoculation the lucerne will not fix nitrogen properly”, he added.

Reg said the weed control prior to sowing is critical.

“Try to clean out weeds the previous year by winter cleaning, spray topping or cropping”, Reg said. “It is important to sow into a relatively clean paddock”, he stressed.

Insect pests such as lucerne flea, red legged earth mite, grubs, weevils and aphids love to attack lucerne.

“Lucerne is an important investment so you must continue to monitor the crop and get advice”, Reg said.

Reg said that lucerne varieties had greatly improved over the last ten years resulting in greater persistence.

“You may have tried lucerne in the past but dropped it because it didn’t grow in winter”, Reg said. “I encourage you to look at the new varieties which are less dormant over winter, have much better quality and will persist quite well if grazed correctly”, he said.

Lucerne has a dormancy rating from one to ten where one has a short growing season and is winter dormant. Varieties with a dormancy rating of 6 or 7 can provide two to three tonnes dry matter during winter.

Reg stresses it is important to grow the variety which suits your particular need.

Winter dormant varieties (dormant rating 1 to 5) have lower denser crowns, are more grazing and drought tolerant, tend to have finer stems and better quality but grow less in winter and total yields can be lower.

Winter active varieties (dormant rating 6 to 10) tend to be narrower and less spreading, basal buds are high in the crown, are usually less grazing tolerant, but have higher total yields.

“It is important to get the basics right”, Reg said. “Choosing the right lucerne variety, soil testing your paddock and taking care with preparation, sowing and management will give you a lucerne stand that will provide you with top quality and quantity fodder”.

EverGraze is a Future Farm Industries CRC, MLA and AWI research and delivery partnership. For further information go to [www.evergraze.com.au](http://www.evergraze.com.au)

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